

Momenta of Sophistry

Adorno's Intimations on Rhetoric and Form in *Noten zur Literatur*

Benjamin Biebuyck

Ghent University

Literature and Notes

That the vogues and trends in philosophy, cultural theory, and literary criticism have evolved in such a manner that the work of Theodor W. Adorno is no longer present in the basic frames of reference of these disciplines is – as the title of this volume indicates – disquieting indeed. The question as to what Adorno's writings can tell us at the crossroads of the manifold disciplines in which we hope that they can still lead to a possible new paradigm for the arts or the *Geisteswissenschaften* is a complex one. It is a question that cannot be resolved in one single movement, but requires a segmented approach that credits the versatility and the dynamics of his thinking. An important stepping stone in this respect may well be a reading of the essays compiled in the four volumes of the *Noten zur Literatur*, if only because they have thus far received little critical attention. The *Noten* consist of thirty-five essays dealing with both prose and poetry, most of them published in the second half of the 1950s and the early 1960s, but genealogically tracing back to the dark years of the Second World War. Even more so than Adorno's other writings, they display his particular sensitivity towards those aspects of human communication that surpass the mere transmission of information, but that nevertheless have a huge impact on the interrelation between humans and cultures: language's formal appearance and its rhetorical performance. Many of these *Noten* contain – albeit to a varying degree – valuable clues that allow us to trace in more detail the contours of Adorno's concepts of form and rhetoric. This topic has usually been considered subservient to the grand ideological and cultural historical tenets of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* or the *Ästhetische Theorie*, yet standing at the crossroads mentioned above, it seems timely not only to understand the way in which the literary work of art

is integrated in Adorno's encompassing philosophical project, but also to gain a better insight into the dynamic actuality of literature. In this essay I hope to reconstruct the concepts of rhetoric and form that underlie Adorno's discussion of literary texts and to evaluate their intrinsic consistency and their transferability to contemporary literary critical positions.¹ For that reason my discussion of form will not refer to musical forms and their impact on Adorno's evaluation of musical compositions, but rather to the material *gestalts* by means of which communicative contents are expressed and which determine the aesthetic potential of human interaction.² In the same sense, the notion of rhetoric will be used to address those aspects of human communication that seek to influence or channel the reception of an instance of communication. Both these concepts play a crucial role in Adorno's response to both Heidegger's and Lukács' notions of the literary artefact.³

Signs of Recitation

In one of the last aphorisms of the third treatise of his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, dealing with the importance of ascetic ideals, Nietzsche puts a provocative question to those who, in the transcendentalist tradition of the Kantian Enlightenment, believe

¹ I am well aware that the restriction of my corpus to *Noten zur Literatur* may seem somewhat arbitrary – no less arbitrary than the compilations themselves, for that matter (particularly the fourth volume, which was edited posthumously by Rolf Tiedemann in 1974). Still, the orientation of the essays towards literary topics and their repeated connections between literary aesthetics on the one hand and formal and rhetorical matters on the other indicate an enhanced consciousness on Adorno's part of his own conceptual position in the different debates he engages with – particularly as these essays are “written from the point of view of a contingent individual experiencing subject”. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, “Toward a More Adequate Reception of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Configurational Form in Adorno's Aesthetic Writings”, in: *Cultural Critique*, 18, 1991, pp. 33-64, here p. 60.

² Bernd Kulawik discusses Adorno's critique of Wagnerian *Formlosigkeit*. Bernd Kulawik, “Wagnerkritik als Kulturkritik der Moderne bei Nietzsche und Adorno”, in: *Nietzscherforschung*, 5.6, 2000, pp. 305-17. As far as the impact of form on the aesthetic is concerned, see the following discussion of Valéry: “Gerade Valéry hat darauf bestanden, daß im ästhetischen Formbegriff keine wie immer geartete Rücksicht auf den Empfangenden oder den Produzierenden enthalten sei. Aber er gleitet darüber hinweg; vielleicht weil sonst die Kunstmetaphysik selbst gefährdet würde. ‘Form’, sagt er im Einverständnis mit dem abgestandenen Formalismus, ‘ist wesentlich an Wiederholung gebunden’”. Theodor W. Adorno, “Valéry's Abweichungen”, in: *Noten zur Literatur II* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1963), pp. 42-94, here p. 84.

³ Explicit indications of this debate can be found in, amongst others, Theodor W. Adorno, “Parataxis. Zur späten Lyrik Hölderlins”, in: *Noten zur Literatur III* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1965), pp. 156-209, esp. p. 162, and in Theodor W. Adorno, “Erpreßte Versöhnung. Zu Georg Lukács' *Wider den mißverstandenen Realismus*”, in: *Noten zur Literatur II*, pp. 152-87, esp. p. 180.

themselves released from asceticism by excluding the “conceptual dogmatism of theology” (“die theologische Begriffs-Dogmatik”): “Wer dürfte es nunmehr den Agnostikern verargen, wenn sie, als die Verehrer des Unbekannten und Geheimnissvollen an sich, *das Fragezeichen selbst* jetzt als Gott anbeten?”.⁴ It is, of course, no coincidence that Nietzsche puts his rhetorical remark about the punctuation worship of agnostics in the shadow of a question mark. The insertion of the question mark is simultaneously a purely grammatical and a performative, self-reflexive gesture, and this underlines the deep impact of such “smooth operators” on the discursive statement and its critical import. Although he does not refer to Nietzsche there, it may be clear that Adorno’s somewhat singular essay on punctuation marks (“Satzzeichen”, published in 1956 in the German periodical *Akzente*)⁵ bears the signs of a similar approach and vision.⁶ Confronting the complex coerciveness of the German *Interpunktionsregeln* with the particular decision that underlies each and every instance of their use, Adorno exposes one of the central theoretical tenets of his discussion of form: a discursive form is not a static phenomenon, but has to be conceived of as an agential category. Forms are not the passive material on which the picture of human communication emerges; rather, they are lively and mobile participants in the overall dynamics of the work of art. As such, they have a proper expressive potential, which does not necessarily correspond to the subject matter the speaker intends to bring forward. When fathoming the depth of this potential, however, we immediately come across Adorno’s warning that punctuation marks are no communicative signs (“Zeichen der Kommunikation”), but signs of speech, of recitation (“des Vortrags”).⁷ The debate on form staged in *Noten zur Literatur*, and in particular in the first volume, is already permeated with the concerns that would lead up to Adorno’s self-restrained settlement of accounts with Heidegger in *Der Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*.⁸ Seen as instances of speech, punctuation marks cannot be accounted for as signposts directing the reader to a

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Kritische Studienausgabe, vol. 3, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), p. 405.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “Satzzeichen”, in: *Noten zur Literatur I* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1963), pp. 161-72.

⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the relation between Nietzsche and Adorno, see in particular Karsten Fischer, “‘Schritt für Schritt weiter in der *décadence* ...’. Zur Dialektik der Aufklärung bei Nietzsche und Adorno”, in: *Nietzscheforschung*, 5.6, 2000, pp. 293-304.

⁷ Adorno, “Satzzeichen”, p. 162.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit. Zur deutschen Ideologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1965).

spot of actuality, on which Being as “Wesen” appears. Instead, Adorno advocates a concept of exclamation marks, dashes, ellipses, quotation marks, parentheses, colons, semicolons, and commas as *catalysts* or *energizers*, which articulate language itself and reveal that speech is a vivacious and slippery process.

Many of the essays in *Noten zur Literatur* lead us to suspect that this concept may be extended to Adorno’s overall notion of form. This brings form back to the immediate surroundings of rhetoric: form is not so much a phenomenal apparition, but a performance, a (corporeal) gesture (“Gebärde”).⁹ There is no doubt that this concept intended to correct certain principles held by the formalism that had dominated the debate on the work of art in the preceding decades. Much more than that, it challenged the ideas of form that were circulating in the German public sphere in the early 1950s. In his monumental monograph *Die Frankfurter Schule*, Rolf Wiggershaus describes how Gottfried Benn’s “Rede auf Stefan George” recycled phrases characteristic of his “constraint and order”-jargon of the 1930s. Form, Benn argued in 1951, is necessary to overcome the barbaric and the demonic (“das Dämonische besiegen durch die Form”).¹⁰ From this point of view, form is a disciplining response to the chaos and sheer vitality of existence and as such a prerequisite of culture and beauty. Sensitive to the restorative impetus behind this perspective, Adorno emphasised that form is not exempt from vitality, but in fact nothing less than a performance of it. He reproached the static view of form for reducing form to mere contingency and sheer coincidence, and for banishing form to the margins and leaving it without correlation to the “content” of the work of art. From this point of view, form is reduced to purely accidental properties (“bloße Akzidenzien”);¹¹ Adorno’s word choice here stresses that form is seen as the inert, receptive spot onto which something falls, against which something is projected or in whose direction it moves (this is well expressed in the German “Zu-fall”).¹²

⁹ For this, see Alexander García Düttmann, “Thinking as Gesture. A Note on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*”, in: *New German Critique*, 81, 2000, pp. 143-52.

¹⁰ See Benn’s “Rede auf Stefan George”: “Der abendländische Mensch unseres Zeitalters besiegt das Dämonische durch die Form [...] Sagen Sie für Form immer Zucht oder Ordnung oder Disziplin oder Norm oder Anordnungsnotwendigkeit”. Quoted in: Rolf Wiggershaus. *Die Frankfurter Schule. Geschichte, theoretische Entwicklung, politische Bedeutung* (München: Hanser, 1977), p. 583.

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Der Essay als Form”, in: *Noten zur Literatur I*, pp. 9-49, here p. 14. Further abbreviated as EF.

¹² A similar use of the noun “Zufall” can be found in Szondi’s *Theories des modernen Dramas*: “Das Zufällige fällt dem Drama von außen zu”. Peter Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas (1880-1950)* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1956), p. 20.

Adorno here presents form as a Platonic idea that history has eroded and covered under the debris of time. It is no coincidence that Adorno falls back on the imagery of sedimentation and petrification in this context. This imagery also occurs in Nietzsche's early philosophy of language. In his essay *Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge in außermoralischem Sinne* (1872), Nietzsche explains the genealogy of language as a process of multiple metamorphoses, in which extra-linguistic stimuli are gradually transferred from the level of their (sensory) registration to the level of their linguistic fixation. The sequence of transferences ("Übertragungen") goes together with a loss of vitality,¹³ through which the "leap", the dynamic principle at the origin, is reduced to its static result: the imprint. The imprint can itself, however, be amalgamated into a larger static whole of concepts, to which Nietzsche refers as the "columbarium".¹⁴ Whereas Nietzsche describes this process with a view to determining the epistemological status of truth and lies, Adorno wants to remove ideological labels from the notion of form in order to uncover its historical backdrop as well as its openness for future negotiation. Hence, instead of "naked accidents", he detects in form its momentum of sophistry ("ein Moment der Sophistik" [EF, 44]).

The Force of Form

Conspicuously, the first volume of *Noten zur Literatur* opens with an essay containing a periphrasis of Adorno's epistemological paradigm. This paradigm is sustained by the genealogical form of the essay itself: "Der Essay als Form".¹⁵ For Adorno, the essay transgresses the classical yet dubious distinction between art and science. It does not focus upon the constant or the permanent, but rather cultivates the ephemeral in the process of its historical becoming and contemplates those aspects of its appearance which make it "irritating and dangerous" (EF, 28). As such, the essay produces knowledge that does not fixate for all times the qualities of truth, but it instead senses

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge in außermoralischem Sinne*, Kritische Studienausgabe, vol. 1, p. 882.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 886.

¹⁵ See also Peter Bürger, "Die Kraft der Sehnsucht und die Zeit des Nachher. Der Essay bei Lukács und Adorno", in: *Neue deutsche Literatur*, 51.5, 2003, pp. 21-31. Adorno follows an analogous argumentation in "Benjamin, der Briefschreiber", in: *Noten zur Literatur IV*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 126-36, esp. pp. 128-29.

the realities it represents intuitively (“Charakteristik der tastenden Intention” [EF, 36]) and thus gives rise to alternative types of insight. This explains why Adorno sees the essay as a prototypical example of a historically conditioned form: it always bears the traces of its own genealogy. One important implication of this is that the form of the essay designates specific contents as apt or inapt for representation; it pictures the emancipated “Geist” as mobile and cunningly undermines the mere assumption of power on the basis of authority.¹⁶ Therefore, the essay is necessarily marked by the remnants of dissent: its most inner formal law, Adorno concludes, is heresy (“Ketzerei” [EF, 49]).¹⁷

Adorno’s anathematic view is again a frontal attack on certain opinions that were current at that time. In his pioneering *Theorie des modernen Dramas* Peter Szondi had argued that a harmonic interplay between form and content is a fundamental necessity for the existence of a genre.¹⁸ A pupil of Emil Staiger, this well-known proponent of the autonomistic reading of literary works of art made the neo-Hegelian claim that as soon as a discrepancy between form and content arises, form would either have to enter a transitional gestalt or simply fall into decay.¹⁹ Adorno, in contrast, denies the primacy of synthesis, yet he also refrains from establishing an alternative definition, insisting that definitions are manipulative and fixating (EF, 28). Far from being reducible to a simple definition, the form of the essay is a *living* form, a reality spontaneously imposing itself upon the contents that present themselves to it. Being “force” as much as “form”, it is destined to give expression to the materiality (“Gegenständlichkeit”) of the world it is confronted with and to resist each attempt at objectification (“Verdinglichung”). Whereas for Szondi the dynamics of the (dramatic) form lay in its historical variability, Adorno characterises form first and foremost as a pragmatic or even a performative category because of its intrinsic agility – in the spirit of Anthony Burgess’s well-known definition of literature as “words working hard”. Still, there is no labour to be detected in the essay: it is rather the stage on which the thought stretches

¹⁶ “Die den Geist glauben gegen Unsolidität verteidigen zu müssen, sind seine [i.e., the essay’s] Feinde: Geist selber, einmal emanzipiert, ist mobil” (EF, 43).

¹⁷ See Hendrik Birus, “Adornos ‘Negative Ästhetik’?”, in: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 62, 1988, pp. 1-23, esp. p. 20.

¹⁸ Adorno dedicated his essay “Parataxis”, which was published in the 1964 volume of the *Neue Rundschau*, to Peter Szondi. Theodor W. Adorno, “Parataxis. Zur späten Lyrik Hölderlins”, in: *Noten zur Literatur III*, pp. 156-209.

¹⁹ Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, pp. 11-20.

down next to its object and engages in an exercise of non-violent reflection (“gleichsam gewaltlos reflektiert” [EF, 45]).²⁰

The fact that form is a vital and active force implies that it may bear the traces of guilt, as well as the memories of suffering and victimization (“die Spur von Leiden”).²¹ It is not a neutral carrier without a history, but it rather testifies to the multiplicities of influences to which it has been exposed. Its testimony reminds us of the intrinsic link between form and rhetoric: it displays associations, there is polysemy in its expressions, and its transitions are scandalous (“anstößig” [EF, 45]). In “Der Essay als Form”, however, Adorno does not specify how the multiplicity associated with the essay as a form can be reconciled with the mobile, vital, anti-totalitarian compound of which he systematically speaks in anthropomorphic terms. The other essays in the *Noten* make clear that the answer to this question has to be found in the two (or actually three) formal phenomena that bridge the gap between epic form and rhetoric: the narrator, on the one hand, metaphor on the other, and allegory as a potential mediator between these two. Yet before we address this point, it is necessary to stress that Adorno, unlike Paul de Man,²² does not conceive of metaphor as a rhetorical mechanism that reduces multiplicity by means of identification, nor does he use the term allegory in the sense of an encompassing figurative catalyst of narration. In the *Noten zur Literatur*, as we will see, entirely different propositions are at stake.

The Emergence of Negativity in Form

When dealing with the characteristics of the epic form, Adorno subtly indicates that what interests him is the “Standort” of the narrator – the place from which the narrator can engage in his project of narration. This position is governed by the law of “Gegenständlichkeit”: the epic must tell about something or someone. Its “Gegenstand” indeed imposes a restriction on the perspective of the narrator; his focus is narrowed

²⁰ This may recall Adorno’s emphasis on the harmlessness of art. See Herbert Kaiser, “Einige Bemerkungen zur literaturdidaktischen Dimension der negativen Ästhetik Adornos”, in: *Theodor W. Adorno. Sonderband Text+Kritik*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold (München: 1977), pp. 159-69, esp. p. 168.

²¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Die Wunde Heine”, in: *Noten zur Literatur I*, pp. 144-52, here p. 150.

²² Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 150-53.

down to the view of something special that escapes regimentation.²³ In the wake of Lukács' literary historical speculations on the origin of the novel as a medium of bourgeois self-fashioning, Adorno insists that the interplay between "Gegenstand" and narrator is governed by "mimeticism". This implies that readers are supposed to sense the represented world as if it were unfolding itself in their presence; they are supposed to experience it not as distant observers, but as if they were bodily immersed in it. Adorno's analysis of contemporary novel art shows that newer novels gradually undermine traditional aesthetic distance, and he detects that the loss of classical realist potential goes together with the growing influence of "as if"-narration. Contemporary novels, Adorno concludes, are negative epopees ("negative Epopöen"),²⁴ surviving on the last remaining aesthetic values of bourgeois ideology.

An interesting instance of the novelistic tradition of the German 1950s is Günter Grass' famous novel *Die Blechtrommel*. This novel, published in 1959, was conceived of and written almost simultaneously with Adorno's reflections and can in many respects be seen as the novelist's answer to Adorno's infamous admonition about the "barbarousness" of post-war poetic production, as I briefly want to illustrate here.²⁵ Without going into the details of the novel's plot, it is safe to describe the novel's surface narrative as a pretext for the "un-narration" of incidents that are not part of this surface because their direct narration would inescapably make them the victims of that very narration.²⁶ This does not mean that the surface narration is trivial or arbitrary – rather, it displays a highly imaginative strategy of avoidance, through which those elements that have to be kept out are always negatively touched upon.

The I-narrator, unreliable in more than one way, exploits his childlike naivety to suggest that he is guilty of crimes we can hardly believe he committed, while he cunningly distances himself from responsibilities we barely consider him ready for, all the while indicating that he does represent things "as they really were". Still, it always seems to be him who lets the incidents take place. A good example of this are the

²³ "Etwas erzählen heißt ja: etwas *Besonderes* zu sagen haben, und gerade das wird von der verwalteten Welt, von Standardisierung und Immergleichheit verhindert". Theodor W. Adorno, "Standort des Erzählers im modernen Roman", in: *Noten zur Literatur I*, pp. 61-72, here p. 63.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁵ See in this respect also Theodor W. Adorno, "Engagement", in: *Noten zur Literatur III*, pp. 109-35, esp. p. 125, and Theodor W. Adorno, "Ist Kunst heiter?", in: *Noten zur Literatur IV*, pp. 147-57, esp. p. 153.

²⁶ See Benjamin Biebuyck, "Günter Grass", in: Anke Gilleir and Bart Philipsen, eds., *Duitse literatuur na 1945, Deel 1. Duitsland 1945-1989* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), pp. 227-49.

vicissitudes of the innkeeper Ferdinand Schmuh, the owner of the famous “Zwiebelkeller” described in one of the last chapters of the third book. On Sundays, as a pastime, Schmuh goes to the country to shoot a fixed number of 12 sparrows.²⁷ Untrue to his seemingly apostolic vocation, Schmuh suddenly decides to kill a thirteenth sparrow and to take the animals home. Yet on the way home he is attacked by a whole swarm of revengeful sparrows and he is struck in a fatal car crash, after which the crucial thirteenth sparrow gets missing. The protagonist describes this scene from a safe narrative distance: without any clear motive, he stepped out of the car in due time and hence describes the end of Schmuh, who has clearly crossed a crucial line, from a perspective characterised by threefold negativity – his being absent, Schmuh getting killed, and the sparrow getting lost.²⁸ This negativity is reinforced by the overall narrative dominance of a specific rhetorical figure: metonymy, as a principle of both microstructural organisation and encompassing narrative orientation. The novel continuously offers us striking examples with a lavish hand: the I-narrator determines persons by their smell and conceives of his drum by its shape, its position on the body, or the material it is made of; characters wear their clothes as the masks and uniforms of classical Greek tragedy. Metonymy thus respects and foregrounds the aspect of “Gegenständlichkeit” in its representation of “reality as it is”, yet it cannot suppress tiny slips through which the focus is shifted to the margins or the outskirts of the “Gegenstand”. In keeping with Adorno’s findings on the post-war novel, the mimetic drive of the scene no longer lies in the mere transcription of the events such as they were, but rather as they retrospectively are supposed to have been. At the same time, the passage indicates that the overall mobility of the epic form needs to be reanalysed in the light of the micrological processes of rhetorical shaping that underlie the form as a whole.

The consistent emergence of negativity in the epic example of Grass’ novel displays interesting positive correlations between Adorno’s theoretical reflections and post-war literary practice, here exemplified by Grass’ novel. This is no surprise to the extent that theory and practice actively engage in a persistent dialogue, in which guilt

²⁷ “[N]iemals schoß Schmuh mehr als zwölf Sperrlinge an einem Nachmittag”. Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel. Roman* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006), p. 685.

²⁸ Cp. to the remarkable multiple perspectival changes in the following sentence: “Zuerst stieg Schmuh vorne ein. Dann stiegen Scholle und Klepp hinten ein. Ich hätte einsteigen sollen, stieg aber nicht ein, sagte, ich wolle noch etwas spazieren, nähme die Straßenbahn, man brauche auf mich keine Rücksicht zu nehmen, und so fuhren sie ohne Oskar, der wohlweislich nicht eingestiegen war, in Richtung Düsseldorf ab”. Ibid., p. 709.

and innocence, collaboration and resistance no longer constitute traditional binary oppositions. The question thus remains whether it is possible to specify the impact of small formal processes on the vivacity and mobility of the textual form as a whole. As far as the narrator is concerned, it is noteworthy that Adorno, in the spirit of his attempt to transgress the boundaries of modern “Verdinglichung” and alienation, sticks to an active, yet highly anthropomorphic notion of the epic form, while he seems unwilling to attribute a similarly dynamic position to the reader.²⁹ But is it imaginable that a dynamic form understood as a vivacious rhetorical gesture could be combined with a passive or static recipient who merely undergoes the aesthetic process? Adorno’s essay on punctuation marks again makes clear that small formal processes are the main operators of the overall dynamics of the text. Adorno interprets the dash as a wrinkle in the forehead of the text (“Falte auf der Stirn der Texte”),³⁰ while the semicolon regulates the economy of our breathing, and the sound of the epic form is associated with the roaring of the sea;³¹ all forms display their proper open repertoire of actions, determined by the historical background of their use. The exclamation mark underlines with the vanished authority of a power from the past the incapacity of the content of the utterance to enforce such authority by itself.³² This explains why in Adorno’s view modern literature refuses to adopt form and rhetoric as the mere *precipitation* (“Niederschlag”) of contents, but on the contrary draws on them to build up a tension with the content – a tension that is significant beyond the significance of the content itself. As such, form and rhetoric are not restricted to their traditional (subservient) role as means of expression, but they guarantee the liveliness of literary transactions and become the autonomous gatekeepers of unsayability.³³

²⁹ See in particular the image of the reader as it appears in Adorno, “Standort des Erzählers im modernen Roman”, pp. 67-69.

³⁰ Adorno, “Satzzeichen”, p. 165.

³¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Über epische Naivetät”, in: *Noten zur Literatur I*, pp. 50-60, here p. 50. Further abbreviated as EN.

³² Adorno, “Satzzeichen”, p. 164.

³³ Cp., for the autonomy of form, Theodor W. Adorno, “Zum Klassizismus von Goethes *Iphigenie*”, in: *Noten zur Literatur IV*, pp. 7-33, here p. 16. Shierry Weber Nichol森 emphasises that Adorno does not situate the autonomy of form in the aesthetic form itself, but rather in the interplay between the subject and the “Gegenstand” of the work of art: “But in the essay the rhetorical moment of pleasure-giving communication with the audience is transformed into the subject’s pleasurable interaction with the object – thus the moment of the essay’s aesthetic autonomy”. Shierry Weber Nichol森, “Toward a More Adequate Reception of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*”, p. 39. In “Die beschworene Sprache”, Adorno clarifies the tension between (agile) form and (adamant) content in terms of an attack: “Den restaurativen,

Penelopoetic Gesture

In the essay “Über epische Naivetät”, Adorno signals that metaphors and similes may well play the most crucial role in boosting the vitality of form. The naïve narrator, of which Homer is the prototype, focuses on the unique character of the singular event to the extent that his figurative description spontaneously overtakes the narrative impetus. In a setting in which the suppression of conceptuality is discussed as “spinning” or “weaving” (“überspinnen” [EN, 54]), the intervention of rhetorical figures may well be called a *Penelopoetic* gesture: “Der Drang Homers, einen Schild wie eine Landschaft zu beschreiben und eine Metapher zur Aktion durchzubilden, bis sie, selbständig geworden, das Gewebe der Erzählung zerreißt” (EN, 55). This helps us to observe that despite its ostensible autonomy, metaphor does not disrupt the narrative – just as Penelope did not destroy the excessive shroud of Laertes – but on the contrary guarantees the continuity of the narration by suspending it. Adorno’s imagery aptly suggests that metaphors cannot be considered as part of the descriptive action of the narrator: having become autonomous, the metaphor penetrates by itself the narrating form and displays itself not as an action, but as an *event* lacking both agent and intentionality. The narrated forms are then both the presupposition for the emergence of metaphors and the background from which the metaphors can take off in order to flourish as additional “spaces” of meaning production that escape both the violence and the authority of conceptual order (“Gewalt der Ordnung” [EN, 55]). The autonomy of metaphor, however, is always an embedded one – only against the backdrop of the overall epic fabric is it really self-sufficient. As such, it is at once ephemeral and susceptible to continual regeneration.

But then again, Adorno asks, does the autonomy of metaphor go so far that the original narrative is eventually reduced to no more than the description of “bare scenes” (“bloße Schauplätze” [EN, 59]) where every person or thing is encapsulated in an encompassing allegorical logic? And further, we can ask why allegory, for Adorno, is

‘wiederherstellenden’ Inhalt attackiert seine Form”. Theodor W. Adorno, “Die beschworene Sprache. Zur Lyrik Rudolph Borchardts”, in: *Noten zur Literatur IV*, pp. 63-89, here p. 67.

not the looked-for synthesis between history, narration and, figurativity? Adorno concludes:

Der objektive Umschlag der reinen bedeutungsfernen Darstellung in die Allegorie der Geschichte ist es, der am logischen Zerfall der epischen Sprache wie an der Ablösung der Metapher vom Gang der buchstäblichen Handlung sichtbar wird. Erst durch Sinnverlassenheit ähnelt die epische Rede dem Bilde sich an, einer Figur objektiven Sinnes, die aus der Negation von subjektiv unvernünftigem Sinn aufsteigt. (EN, 59-60)

Such a decline of epic speech and such a radical detachment between metaphor and the course of narration can be avoided. Somewhere in the middle of “Der Essay als Form”, Adorno himself experiments with a kind of Homeric simile: “Wie der Essay die Begriffe sich zueignet, wäre am ehesten vergleichbar mit dem Verhalten von einem, der in fremdem Land gezwungen ist, dessen Sprache zu sprechen, anstatt schulgerecht aus Elementen sie zusammenzustümpfern” (EF, 29). The simile continues for several sentences and gradually develops its own narrative logic, without being disconnected from the original comparative situation; it becomes a metaphoric micronarrative.³⁴ In contrast to allegory, there is no linear correlation between the two now superposed narrative dimensions here, one of which is temporarily blended out to the extent that one particle of it bubbles open. The suspended narrative is now covered by the micronarrative, but it is manifestly non-identical with it. The dynamics of form is enhanced by the fact that the elements of the micronarrative enter *into a relation, into interplay* with the forms of the encompassing narration. The energizing potential of this step cannot be underestimated, since the forms do not look for hierarchy, but, like the essay, strive for coordination and thus open up perspectives for incessant transformation.

Even though he does not use the term explicitly, it seems that Adorno’s explorations into the dynamics of forms reach their summit in metaphoric micronarrativity. A small clue at the end of the “Satzzeichen”-essay hints at yet another

³⁴ It would definitely be interesting to confront Adorno’s concepts of form and rhetoric with his own textual practice and use of formal and rhetorical processes. See in this respect Shierry Weber Nicholsen about Adorno’s argumentative strategy as a “configurational form”. Weber Nicholsen, “Toward a More Adequate Reception of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*”, p. 40.

form in which narrativity, metaphor, and negativity are intertwined. The conclusion of the essay is as follows: “Jedes behutsam vermiedene Zeichen ist eine Reverenz, welche die Schrift dem Laut darbringt, den sie erstickt”.³⁵ In his dialogue with the idiosyncratic punctuation of the George Kreis, Adorno concludes that punctuation marks are energised through their interplay, even when they are not actually there. Starting from the hypothesis that different figurative forms can grow together into bigger configurative complexes, and that by doing so they can unfold their own narrative potential, it makes sense to state that next to the regular narrative a second, lapidary narrative becomes visible.³⁶ In this narrative, the metaphors initially explained as events without agent or intentionality now operate as narrative actions on a secondary level: that of the paranarrative.³⁷ On this level, it becomes possible to disrupt the lines of linearity, causality, and temporality characteristic of the first level, thus instigating a process in which interrelations are constantly rearranged.

The negative “surplus” of the paranarrative is, conspicuously, that the fabric of the second order narration does not only allow for meaningful networks between metaphors, but also for the detection and evaluation of *negative metaphors*, figures of speech emerging precisely from their absence in a narratively structured network of figurative instances. The paranarrative may well display blind spots and voids as much as any other narrative; the protentive and retentive determination of the other metaphors induces the circumscription of a determinate, figurative “Leerstelle”, whose negative presence supports the overall vitality and mobility of form and which can be seen as one further step away from the sedimentation and abstraction of language so passionately rejected by Adorno.³⁸ Hence, an image of negative form and rhetoric appears, which bridges the gap between the internal aesthetic dynamics of a work of art and its valuation as a social fact. This makes clear why, for Adorno, at least in the

³⁵ Adorno, “Satzzeichen”, p. 172.

³⁶ See, with respect to micronarrativity and figurativeness, Benjamin Biebuyck and Gunther Martens, “Configurative Para- and Micronarrative. Considerations on the Role of Metaphor on the Intersection of Rhetoric and Narratology, with References to Nietzsche’s *Ueber die Zukunft der Bildungsanstalten*”, in: Elzbieta Kluszevska and Grzegorz Szpila, eds., *In Search of (Non)Sense. Literary Semantics and the Related Fields and Disciplines* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming).

³⁷ The term was first used by Luz Aurora Pimentel to describe forms of layered, figural narrativity. Luz Aurora Pimentel, *Metaphoric Narration. Paranarrative Dimensions in A la recherche du temps perdu* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990). For more detailed information about my use of this concept, see Biebuyck and Martens, “Configurative Para- and Micronarrative”.

³⁸ For a more extensive discussion of protentive and retentive reading modes, see Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (München: Fink, 1976), pp. 181-82.

philosophical project carried out in the diverse contributions in *Noten zur Literatur*, aesthetic appreciation is not – as Hartmut Scheible suggests in his discussion of Adorno’s and Kant’s concept of the *sensus communis* – “ungleich wichtiger” than its historical embeddedness;³⁹ it is rather a precondition for the subject’s ability to have access to spaces of (social) exclusion and repression that fall outside the range of artistic representation. This explains why, as Hendrik Birus convincingly argues, “die emphatische Arbeit an der ‘Form der Darstellung’” is a fundamental part of Adorno’s “Programm einer ‘Individuation der Erkenntnis’”.⁴⁰ Being ephemeral, even slightly nomadic forms, and calling for dialectics and dispute, negative form and rhetoric can be seen as the ultimate momenta of sophistry in Adorno’s universe of vivid forms.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W., “Der Essay als Form”, in: *Noten zur Literatur I* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1963), pp. 9-49.
- , “Über epische Naivetät”, in: *Noten zur Literatur I*, pp. 50-60.
- , “Standort des Erzählers im modernen Roman”, in: *Noten zur Literatur I*, pp. 61-72.
- , “Die Wunde Heine”, in: *Noten zur Literatur I*, pp. 144-52.
- , “Satzzeichen”, in: *Noten zur Literatur I*, pp. 161-72.
- , “Valéry’s Abweichungen”, in: *Noten zur Literatur II* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1963), pp. 42-94.
- , “Erpreßte Versöhnung. Zu Georg Lukács’ *Wider den mißverstandenen Realismus*”, in: *Noten zur Literatur II*, pp. 152-87.
- , “Engagement”, in: *Noten zur Literatur III* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1965), pp. 109-35.
- , “Parataxis. Zur späten Lyrik Hölderlins”, in: *Noten zur Literatur III*, pp. 156-209.
- , *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit. Zur deutschen Ideologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1965).
- , “Zum Klassizismus von Goethes *Iphigenie*”, in: *Noten zur Literatur IV*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 7-33.

³⁹ “Kant verpflichtete angemessenes Kunstverständnis – in seinen Begriffen: das Allgemeinheit beanspruchende ästhetische Geschmacksurteil – unablässig auf die außerästhetische historische Dynamik. Selbstverständlich leugnet auch Adorno diese Beziehung nicht; nachdrücklich betont er den *Doppelcharakter* der Werke, sie seien zugleich *autonom* und *fait social*. Aber, und das ist die entscheidende Differenz, für die angemessene Rezeption der Werke ist, Adorno zufolge, die Autonomie der Werke, ihre innerästhetische Dynamik, ungleich wichtiger als ihre Bedeutung als *fait social*. Der Ästhetiker zieht sich in den innerästhetischen Raum zurück, das *Differential*, das die Werke darstellen: preisgegeben ist der Anspruch, die innerästhetische Dynamik in historische Dynamik umzusetzen”. Hartmut Scheible, “Geschichte im Stillstand. Zur Ästhetischen Theorie Theodor W. Adornos”, in: *Theodor W. Adorno. Sonderband Text+Kritik*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold (München: 1977), pp. 92-118, here p. 97.

⁴⁰ Birus, “Adornos ‘Negative Ästhetik?’”, p. 20.

- , "Die beschworene Sprache. Zur Lyrik Rudolph Borchardts", in: *Noten zur Literatur IV*, pp. 63-89.
- , "Benjamin, der Briefschreiber", in: *Noten zur Literatur IV*, pp. 126-36.
- , "Ist Kunst heiter?", in: *Noten zur Literatur IV*, pp. 147-57.
- Biebuyck, Benjamin, "Günter Grass", in: Anke Gilleir and Bart Philipsen, eds., *Duitse literatuur na 1945, Deel 1. Duitsland 1945-1989* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), pp. 227-49.
- Biebuyck, Benjamin and Gunther Martens, "Configurative Para- and Micronarrative. Considerations on the Role of Metaphor on the Intersection of Rhetoric and Narratology, with References to Nietzsche's *Ueber die Zukunft der Bildungsanstalten*", in: Elzbieta Kluszevska and Grzegorz Szpila, eds., *In Search of (Non)Sense. Literary Semantics and the Related Fields and Disciplines* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming).
- Birus, Hendrik, "Adornos 'Negative Ästhetik'?", in: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 62, 1988, pp. 1-23.
- Bürger, Peter, "Die Kraft der Sehnsucht und die Zeit des Nachher. Der Essay bei Lukács und Adorno", in: *Neue deutsche Literatur*, 51.5, 2003, pp. 21-31.
- De Man, Paul, *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
- Fischer, Karsten, "'Schritt für Schritt weiter in der décadence ...'. Zur Dialektik der Aufklärung bei Nietzsche und Adorno", in: *Nietzscheforschung*, 5.6, 2000, pp. 293-304.
- García Düttmann, Alexander, "Thinking as Gesture. A Note on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*", in: *New German Critique*, 81, 2000, pp. 143-52.
- Grass, Günter, *Die Blechtrommel. Roman* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006).
- Iser, Wolfgang, *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (München: Fink, 1976).
- Kaiser, Herbert, "Einige Bemerkungen zur literaturdidaktischen Dimension der negativen Ästhetik Adornos", in: *Theodor W. Adorno. Sonderband Text+Kritik*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold (München: 1977), pp. 159-69.
- Kulawik, Bernd, "Wagnerkritik als Kulturkritik der Moderne bei Nietzsche und Adorno", in: *Nietzscheforschung*, 5.6, 2000, pp. 305-17.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge in außermoralischem Sinne*, Kritische Studienausgabe, vol. 1., ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999).
- , *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Kritische Studienausgabe, vol. 3.
- Pimentel, Luz Aurora, *Metaphoric Narration. Paranarrative Dimensions in A la recherche du temps perdu* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).
- Scheible, Hartmut, "Geschichte im Stillstand. Zur Ästhetischen Theorie Theodor W. Adornos", in: *Theodor W. Adorno. Sonderband Text+Kritik*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold (München: 1977), pp. 92-118.
- Szondi, Peter, *Theorie des modernen Dramas (1880-1950)* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1956).
- Weber Nicholzen, Shierry, "Toward a More Adequate Reception of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Configurational Form in Adorno's Aesthetic Writings", in: *Cultural Critique*, 18, 1991, pp. 33-64.

Wiggershaus, Rolf, *Die Frankfurter Schule. Geschichte, theoretische Entwicklung, politische Bedeutung* (München: Hanser, 1977).